

# Join the party: Networking for wallflowers

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## Presentation Transcript

### Introduction

I'm here to make a public confession - I'm an introvert. Yes, I know - an introverted librarian - we're exploding stereotypes here at NLS6. So, yes, I'm an introvert, that's just who I am and I don't want to change about myself. However, I am a recovering wallflower; I admit I still tremble a little when a cashier asks me how my day was. I get flustered and finally mumble something semi-incoherent. So, forget about walking into a room with a bunch of strangers awkwardly holding wine glasses and canapés making small talk. What a nightmare.

You are probably now asking yourself - why are you standing up there and what could you possibly have to tell me about the worst thing ever - networking? Well, the fact that I could even get up here today hopefully will inspire you a little bit. Believe me; I had a few night sweats thinking about this moment. But one reason I challenged myself to try this is because I've gained confidence bit by bit by going out to events and building a peer support network. I truly believe that this has helped my career but also enriched my personal life and I'd like to see that happen for you as well.

Now I should also introduce my co-author who is in Indonesia today. You can call her Uti. She, like me, is quiet and tends to stick to the margins of the room. Typical wallflower behaviour. However, while studying in Australia she made a commitment to herself to make friends and connections to get the most out of

her time here. One connection she made is me. We worked on several projects together including this one. I will talk more about her experience as we go.

An important thing to mention at this point is that I will be speaking from my introverted perspective but I do think that most people, not just introverts, don't really like "networking." Some extroverted friends of mine love to talk and to meet new people but they are not confident with structured networking and don't know how to get the most out of it. People seem to range along the continuum from absolutely loathe to sort of tolerate it.

That's cool. You don't need to love it to be able to do it or to be good at it. If you take anything away from this today it's that you realise you do not need to change your personality to be successful. You just have to find your style and go with it. I'll give you some pointers on how to do that.

### **Why building a networking is important for LIS professionals**

While studying here at QUT for my master's degree I was constantly told that the LIS profession is a small community and it is important to get to know people. Honestly, my reaction to that was whoa – I want to be a librarian not a sales account manager or lawyer or something. But actually it **is** a small community and it **is** helpful to know people for many reasons. It has been challenging for both Uti and I but we believe that building a network has had many benefits. Here are three of them.

- **Get a Job!** At first, for me networking was all about finding a job. I just really needed a job. But in practice it takes a long time building relationships before you can turn those into an actual job. So networking may help you land an interview but it shouldn't be the main purpose. You don't want to appear desperate or a brownnoser cornering that poor library manager who just wants to have a relaxed conversation over drinks. Instead try to think about networking as a way to do an environmental scan of your industry. By talking to a variety of people you can learn about different types of libraries and roles within libraries,

you can learn about the culture of a certain workplace and if that would be a good fit for you.

For example, at a certain point I was feeling a bit desperate and thought I should just apply for any job as long as it sort of library-related. From several people I had heard about one particular workplace and the management style there. I realised that I'd absolutely hate it there so I didn't waste my time to apply. Or worse yet, get the job and have to work there!

- Get a life! Finding work that pays the bills and is meaningful is really important but that's not the end of the story. Whether you have that dream job yet or not you will still need your own personal cheer squad. The connections you make are crucial to prevent isolation. In any job you're going to have deal with new tasks, boring stuff, working with a variety of people good and bad and even redundancy unfortunately. It is very useful to have people to talk to outside of your workplace and outside of your family or friend circle who can be neutral and who may have more experience than you.
- Get a clue! Your network can help you through tough times but also you become a more knowledgeable professional. I'm sure most of us have heard or read about PLNs – personal learning networks. I won't go into much detail about this but basically we are all very busy and don't have time to read every journal article or blog post that we would like. Participating in a PLN is one way to keep up-to-date without doing all the work yourself. Besides passively receiving information from your PLN you can also ask questions and share your experiences as well. This is especially important for students and new professionals. We can learn and grow together.

Obviously networks are amazing! But first you have to build yourself one.

Easier said than done.

## Why it is hard to do

It's not easy but why is it so damn hard? There are as many reasons as there are people. The key to your success is finding the source of your discomfort and then working on strategies to counteract this. As well it is useful to understand that there are some things we can change about ourselves and others we just can't. Before I said I was an introvert but what do I mean by that? Words like shyness and introversion are often used interchangeably. In her excellent book *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking* Susan Cain offers this definition from the field of personality research:

"Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating. Shyness is inherently painful; introversion is not" (2012, p. 12).

I know that I have often said I am shy and I think that I really was shy as a young person. But now that wouldn't really be accurate. It is my introverted temperament that makes me feel exhausted at conferences with their constant stimulation and need to be "on."

For yourself, make a list of what scares you about networking or social settings. How do these activities make you feel? Is it social anxiety, shyness, introversion or are you just a misanthrope?

Some possible fears are:

- I don't know what to say.
- I'm afraid of saying something stupid.
- People will think I'm dumb.
- I'm not knowledgeable enough on this topic to give my opinion.
- I don't want to bother/interrupt someone having a conversation with someone I don't know. = I'm annoying them.

There are plenty more. Just remember that your fears are not silly. They are common and reasonable. If you want to read more about how our behaviours reflect these inner desires/fears I'd recommend Hugh Mackay's

*What makes us Tick?* (2010). It's written for a general audience and it might help you to articulate some of these barriers you experience in social interactions.

## **Tips/recommendations**

We know that networking is beneficial and that there are legitimate reasons to think it is difficult. So let's move on to some practical advice. If you do even a minimal amount of searching you will find numerous articles and blog posts of tips for networking or networking for introverts or something like that. Like these for example [Slide]. Obviously this subject causes anxiety for many people, just like public speaking. What I want to talk about are the tips Uti and I have actually used and found they worked for us. I'll let you decide which ones fit your personality.

### **1. Accept and know yourself**

Self-reflection is a useful tool to explore your sore spots and understand how you have been reacting to situations. And then accept that this is who you are.

So I'm an introvert, right? In a completely misguided bid to make myself more "outgoing" I took a job teaching children in an 8 hour block with only a 10 minute break each hour and a very short lunch break. I gave it my all but it was a disaster in the end. I was always sick and just did not want to see my friends or even my partner after work. I had no time to recharge away from people.

When I changed jobs so that I basically didn't talk to anyone all day and only taught for four hours a week I enjoyed it so much more and those were some of the best classes I had. I learned to work with my comfort level and the amount of time I could be around people without snapping.

When Uti attended her first conference, she tried to go to almost every session and connect with as many people she could on the first day. The conference was for three days but because of her extreme first day, she got sick couldn't

enjoy the rest of the conference. Maybe some of you can relate here on the last day of the Symposium. After that experience, she realised that there was no point in pushing herself so hard. For her, it's a marathon not a sprint so she needed to pace herself and know her limits.

## 2. Attitude adjustment

Take a moment and answer this question for yourself – what do you like about networking? Did anything positive come up? If it did, great. If not, think about how this subconscious negativity will affect your attitude when you are in a networking situation.

Before any bout of networking consciously notice your attitude. If you are thinking “ugh, I hate this, I hate small talk, this is a waste of time” it's going to show through on some level. At the very least you will feel like you're a big fake when you try and smile and talk about the weather. Instead try to think about it in a different way and with different expectations – like I will hear at least one new or interesting thing today.

## 3. Articulate your goals

Another question. Why are you here at this conference? Why did you go to the tweet-up Saturday night? What do you want to get out of it? The answer is going to be different for every person but also for you at different points of time. Success for you may be that you get one email address so you can keep in contact later. Or maybe it's just talking to one person for five minutes. Be realistic.

I have to admit that I only started going to professional development events because it was required as part of my degree. I went to a couple because I “had” to but then found a great group of people who have become friends. I needed that particular incentive to go in the first place. If you do not have a specific goal like that make yourself one. It will help you stick with it.

Susan Cain suggests making a “free trait agreement” with yourself (2012, p. 221). Let's say you want to achieve a specific goal - building a professional

network. To reach this goal you decide to attend one social event a month because you know this will help you meet people. If you can fulfill this promise to yourself then you do not need to feel guilty for not doing more. You have reached your target. The great thing is that once you've attended a few events you will probably have made enough connections which can be maintained in other ways and you can go to fewer events. It is a short term trade off for a long term gain.

#### 4. Give back

You've probably heard this from your mother, father, etc. – they are just as scared of you as you are of them. Well, it's true. No matter how nervous you feel others at the party are probably equally nervous unless they're drunk or something. Smile. When you do get into a conversation actually listen and respond. Don't look around the room like you are trying to escape – those people are the worst.

When I don't know anyone at a party I make the classic move which works for everybody - go up to the other person who is standing alone. He or she is probably just as uncomfortable as me and unsure where to start.

The first conference I went to was a large ALIA Biennial. I was a student and felt completely out of my depth. The very first morning, I registered and then I stood holding my teacup trying not to give in and run and hide the bathroom. A woman approached me and we talked about the pastries for a few minutes until it was time to go to the welcome. I never saw her again but I was truly grateful. We spent a short time together and didn't talk about anything important but it was what I needed to get over my fear.

Think about what you can do to make yourself valuable to others. If you are a socially confident person then you can be the one to make other attendees feel at ease. If you aren't as social maybe you can be that awesome listener that the extroverted person loves to talk to. Once you have a network, start participating. What can you add to someone else's knowledge? Do you have any unique experiences/ hobbies? Share them.

## 5. Find your own style

Now that you know yourself, your limits, your goals and you've got that sharing and caring attitude let your personality shine. As I mentioned already, it is hard to feel comfortable when you are trying to act like something you are not. Fake it till you make it is a phrase thrown around a lot but personally the more I fake it the faker I feel even when I "make it." But the sentiment is helpful. You do need to keep trying even when you really don't want to.

I'll never be the one dancing on a table but I will probably be the one rounding people up, organising transportation to the party and making sure you get home safe. I'm a facilitator, that's my style. If you are a table dancer, please... go for it.

## 6. Keep practicing

The only way to really improve your skills is to practice, practice, practice. One way to do this is by actually getting out and talking to people. Attending NLS6 was an excellent decision on your part. Congratulations for being here! One good thing about LIS-specific events is that they are generally low risk. Meaning the environment tends to be more relaxed and collegial. It is very helpful to practice at these events and then use your new skills when you find yourself in more pressurised situations such as within your organisation or in the community.

For example, I work in a university and must attend many meetings outside the library with people from very different backgrounds and working cultures. By practicing at events like this it has helped me adjust to these less relaxed occasions.

## 7. Make a role for yourself – volunteering

The best thing I did for myself was start volunteering. Uti as well. Volunteering gives you something to actually do and talk about with people. It's like me



standing here not knowing what to do with my hands. I can put them on the podium until I am more confident and then I can start waving them around.

Uti became very involved with the QUT International Students Services events as a photographer. Like the podium here, she had her camera in her hand which gave her an anchor. She got to know her classmates better in a comfortable way which helped her later to speak up more in class. I know that she made a real impact because when I attended her graduation ceremony she received a special recognition award for her volunteer work.

As for me, I've met many of you lovely people already because of my volunteer role on the committee for NLS6 and also as an ALIA New Grads Group coordinator in Brisbane. So now I do know a lot of people when I go to events. I mentioned before I'm most comfortable in a facilitating role so volunteering fits well with that.

## 8. Get a return on your investment

You got yourself to an event, that's great! But that is not the end. You'll now have to maintain and grow your network. Not all of us have a great memory so you may need to keep interacting to make an impression. You can always use social media to strengthen your relationships as well. It probably is best to have at least some online and some face-to-face interaction. If you are more confident typing than talking then start there.

Here comes the obligatory Twitter plug.

Twitter is just one communication tool but it is one of the most popular in Libraryland. Uti actually conducted a research project which found that the many LIS professionals use Twitter to connect to others but she confesses that she herself is not a prolific Twitter user. She prefers to use e-mail, Skype or Gtalk to keep in touch. No matter what tools you prefer, maximise your use of them to meet your goals.

## Conclusion

The Symposium is coming to a close this afternoon. I hope you've had fun but also been inspired to challenge yourself this year. You've probably noticed there were quite a few presentations about networking, making connections, branding yourself, etc. I think that's because these are areas we have some control over. We can't control the job market but we can make the most of opportunities to get out there and get known.

My experience is uniquely mine (as is Uti's) but I hope that you could relate to us and can now start thinking about your next step. There's still the BBQ tonight and Information Online the rest of the week. Lots of people to meet.

In the past you may have been the wallflower holding up the wall at parties but that doesn't mean you have to stay there. Take a step away from that wall and someday.

## Reference

Cain, S. (2012). *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*. New York: Crown.